

E-Mail Rules of Engagement: A Modest Proposal

Sure, it's easy, but are we compromising our leadership principles?

by Major Joseph S. McLamb

"Management by e-mail" is something of an emotional term in our Army today. On the one hand are junior officers and NCOs who are frustrated that e-mail allows their seniors to send a rapid stream of information and guidance without the personal interaction that is the hallmark of effective direct leadership. On the other hand are the more senior leaders, who find that e-mail is an extremely effective and efficient means of managing information. If you think e-mail is bad, they might say, you should have been here before we had it.

Both schools of thought have real merit. E-mail is, in fact, a powerful tool of information management. The real issues with e-mail are more correctly identified as the methods that leaders use to employ the technology, not the technology itself. Perhaps a short vignette will illustrate this.

A Purely Hypothetical Scenario

It all started, as most such incidents do, with a great idea. Since the details of the great idea are not important, we'll call it simply Idea X. For our purposes, we'll assume that Idea X had real value, the kind of idea that people look at several years later and say, "I can't believe we ever did this any other way." When someone brought Idea X to the attention of Major General A, he immediately recognized the value of the idea. What wasn't immediately clear, however, was the feasibility of Idea X. Although his gut told him that the costs would be negligible, the general decided to let his staff look into the issue.

Since Major General A was a busy man, he turned to his laptop computer and sent an e-mail message to the chief of staff. It read:

To: COL B
From: MG A

Bob:

This Idea X looks like a good deal. What would it take to make this work? Get back to me by the end of the week.

As you might imagine, COL B was also a busy man. He read the general's e-mail, along with about 46 others, during what his calendar euphemistically referred to as "lunch." He visualized a short e-mail response to the general that would briefly outline the effect and cost of implementing Idea X. Since the idea dealt with training, he decided to forward it to the G3. As he thought about it, however, he remembered that the G3 had a tendency to fire off hasty responses to questions from the general. Hitting the "forward" button on his e-mail, he sent the following to COL C:

To: COL C
From: COL B

Jim:

Please respond to the below. Have all the pertinent background data so we can answer any questions from the CG.

Colonel C saw the e-mail well after the hour that he had told his wife he would be home that evening. It occurred to him that he already knew the answer to the CG's question, since it happened that his own area of expertise involved the very issues raised by Idea X. He started a quick e-mail note in response, then thought about the chief's caveat. After some reflection, he sent the below to LTC D, a hard-working staff officer.

To: LTC D
From: COL C

Ted:

Put together a brief for the CG on the below. Let me see it by Thursday. Plan on less than 30 minutes.

LTC D had come in early to knock out some work prior to PT when he saw the G3's e-mail. The answer to the CG's question seemed quite obvious to him, and he secretly wished he could just talk informally to the CG for two minutes to meet the requirement. Based on the G3's guidance, however, he decided that he should have all his ducks in a row by Thursday. He sent the following to MAJ E:

To: MAJ E
From: LTC D

Mike:

Looks like this could get hot. Get with the brigade 3s and find out what the impact of this will be on them. I need to see draft slides NLT COB on Wednesday.

MAJ E got the message just after PT, and realized that this project was going to cause him some pain because he already had a full day's work ahead of him. His only hope of meeting the Wednesday suspense would be to have the brigade input by the end of the day. That would allow him to knock out the draft slides late that night. As he changed out of his PT gear, he sent the following message:

To: Brigade S3s
From: MAJ E

Guys:

Need your input NLT 1700 today. Use standard division slide format. Keep main briefing slides down to NMT 20; use backup slides as necessary. Please send me the name of your AO NLT 1200 today.

And so it was that CPT F, assistant operations officer for 2nd Brigade, learned at 1015 that his entire day would now be devoted to preparing a briefing on a topic he had never heard of until that moment. The brigade S3 printed the entire e-mail message, which in its final form looked like this:

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To: COL B
From: MG A

Bob:

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With only the minimum amount of sniveling to the boss, he left the S3's office and went back to his desk. He called his wife and told her he would miss dinner tonight, since his plan to finish the QTB slides prior to 1900 had been fatally wounded. A non-branch qualified captain would now spend the rest of the day attempting to interpret the guidance of a two-star general.

A Modest Proposal

If this fictional story sounds fantastic to you, it probably means that you have not checked your e-mail lately. Although this version is a bit of a hyperbole, such incidents are far from unusual. The great advantages of an immediate, universal communication capability throughout the Army are often offset by our failure to apply the basic rules of communication that we teach young officers and NCOs. As both a victim and a perpetrator of poor e-mail communication, I would like to offer some basic rules of engagement for your consideration. Like all rules of thumb, these rules will have exceptions, and occasions when violating them may be the correct course of action.

Rule 1: Be clear and be brief. If you can't do both, then be clear.

The great lure of e-mail is that it is quick. We should recognize, however, that the speed of the communication medium is not connected to the time required to draft a message that is characterized by clarity and brevity. The reputation of e-mail as "quick and easy" has caused us, perhaps unconsciously, to think of communication itself as quick and easy. All of military history teaches us that this isn't true. Communication is a tough business, regardless of how efficient your communication medium may be. There is no substitute for clear, concise writing. "Please respond with a paragraph

or two in e-mail format" is a phrase that, if used when appropriate, could save the Army thousands of man-hours of wasted effort.

Rule 2: Don't forward guidance from higher to a subordinate without comment.

Admittedly, this seems like a great idea, since it increases general situational awareness. Think back to our example, however. As each person forwarded the e-mail, he assumed that clear and concise guidance could be extracted from the higher headquarter's guidance. Unfortunately, this wasn't the case. The end result was a junior officer attempting to interpret guidance that was never meant for him. The responsibility for clear and concise communication rests at every echelon. If you can't capture your higher's guidance in your own words, it's a good sign that you don't understand it well enough. To pass it on, as is, to your subordinates simply multiplies the problem, and is essentially irresponsible.

In our earliest days in the Army, we all learned an even more basic reason to avoid forwarding guidance to subordinates. Everyone knows that leaders should never pass orders to subordinates with the phrase, "Okay, higher has directed that we..." The lure of e-mail has apparently caused us to forget this basic rule of leadership.

Rule 3: Don't forward a subordinate's response to a higher headquarters.

The reasons for this match those of Rule #2, with the added fact that forwarding a subordinate's response looks like you're passing the buck. Subordinates will be hesitant to respond openly if they know that their responses routinely end up several echelons higher.

Rule 4: Don't use e-mail to admonish a subordinate.

Perhaps the very first lesson we learn as leaders is "praise in public, admonish in private." E-mail is not a private communication medium, as all too many examples have demonstrated. Admonishment requires a very personal touch, if the goal is to improve performance. Blasting a subordinate through e-mail is perhaps one of the very worst ways to influence behavior. A leader who makes this his routine procedure will soon find that he is having the opposite of his desired effect.

Making the Most of the Technology

E-mail is a powerful tool in the hands of an effective leader. As often happens with emerging technology, however, the Army as an institution has fielded the hardware without fully understanding its effect on the software that lies between the ears of our soldiers. In our efforts to make the technology as efficient as possible, we've set aside some basic rules of leadership. Not surprisingly, the result has been subordinates who are dissatisfied with their leaders. By applying the tried and true leadership rules of days gone by, however, we can harness the power of e-mail without suffering from its inherent dangers.

MAJ Joseph McLamb is an infantryman currently serving as the commander of O Troop, 3rd Squadron, 16th Cavalry Regiment. His previous assignments include observer/controller at the Joint Readiness Training Center, company commander in the 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault), and tours at the National Training Center and Korea.